

Female image from Euripides to Churchill

Alexandra FELSEGHI •

Abstract: This article aims to present some methods in which classical and contemporary playwrights choose to treat female characters in their writings. In close connection with a socio-political context that is continuously changing, female characters in dramaturgy are substantially evolving. If in the past centuries they developed almost exclusively in relation with the masculine characters, today they have a distinct, powerful voice, which is profoundly anchored in everyday realities. This voice accuses gender inequalities or abuses with which we are confronting as a society and also promotes an image of a female different from the stereotypes rooted in the collective mind. A key moment of this revolution in dramaturgy is the appearance of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, in 1982. This legendary moment innovated the manner in which we think feminine and feminism on stage and also the way in which we construct the structure of a story or a dialogue. All of these became a major influence for nowadays' dramaturgy. In the following, I will try to illustrate a few perspectives on female identity as seen through the lens of contemporary reader and spectator.

Keywords: feminist theatre, feminism, political theatre, gender identity, performative writing

The female image in theatre and plays has constantly changed over time, transitioning from the ally or the ideal projected by the masculine imaginary to independent personalities who rebel against the traditional social norms. The latter have created true pro and con sides among the public and the readers and succeeded to adjust, to some extent, the way in which we perceive the category they belong to. The three characters I have chosen to analyze in the following belong to different eras and currents, but what connects them is the anarchic dimension in relationship with the world and their will to shatter the restrictions imposed by it.

I. Medea and the refusal of traditional roles in society

In the introduction of their book, *Queer Euripides: Re-Readings in Greek Tragedy*, Mario Telò and Sarah Olsen speak of Medea as it follows: "The Black Sea

• Freelance dramaturg and teaching assistant at Faculty of Theatre and Film, Theatre Department of Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

princess is also, to an extent, an icon of the gaga feminism theorized by Jack Halberstam: an intersectional, queer, cis and trans (*) feminism characterized by „a refusal of the mushy sentimentalism that has been siphoned into the category of womanhood”; „an ecstatic embrace of loss of control”; „funky forms of anarchy”, and „an antisentimental fascination with loss, lack, darkness”¹. Analyzing her entire set of actions which she undertakes throughout the play, we can only confirm, as readers/viewers, that we witness the first representation of intersectional feminism on a theatre stage. Although it questions gender roles by throwing into the air stereotypes and clichés (understood as that from the perspective of a XXIst century reader), Medea’s famous monologue cannot be ‘alienated’ from her conflict with Jason, which stands at the basis of the entire structure of the tragedy. However, the representation of the female image in society and Medea’s rejection of this image is admirably constructed by Euripides, especially since the words are spoken in front of an exclusively-female chorus: ”Of all the living creature with a soul/ and mind, we women are the most pathetic./ First of all, we have to buy a husband:/ spent vast amounts of money, just to get/ a master for our body - to add insult/ to injury. And the stakes could not be higher:/ will you get a decent husband, or a bad one?/ If a woman leaves her husband, then she loses/ her virtuous reputation. To refuse him/ is just not possible. When a girl leaves home/ and comes to live with new ways, different rules,/ she has to be a prophet - learn somehow/ the art of dealing smoothly with her bedmate./ If we do well and if our husband bear/ the yoke without discomfort or complaint,/ our lives are admired. If not, it’s best to die./ (...) They say that we lead safe, untroubled lives/ at home while they do battle with the spear./ They’re wrong. I’d rather take my stand behind a shield three times then go through childbirth once.”²

More serious than invoking risky family relationships and the deprivations of freedom and autonomy over one’s own body, Medea publicly refuses maternity - understood as the basic function and the main duty of a woman of those times. We can interpret her words as an act of serious deviation from the norm (also due to her condition as a stranger in the city of Corinth), as an ur-Feminism, or as a negative example that Euripides wished to give to the citizens of his time.

Therefore, I will try to answer to the question posed by Douglas Cairns³: is *Medea* a feminist or a misogynist play? I start from the consideration that any play gains different understanding valances through the filter of the reality context in which ends up materializing on stage. In 2022, ‘the female issue’ is once again in the public

¹ Olsen, Sara, Mario Telò (edit.), *Queer Euripides: Re-Readings in Greek Tragedy*, UK, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, pg 2, *op cit.* Halberstam, Jack, *Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*, SUA, Beacon Press, 2012, p. xiii, 139, and 143

² Euripides, *Medea*, translated by Diane Arnson Svarlien, USA, Hackett Publishing Company, 2008, p. 12

³ Stuttard, David (edit.), *Looking at Medea*, UK, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, (author: Cairns, Douglas, *Medea: Feminism or Misogyny?*, p. 123-138)

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

eye, as a subject for protests and public debates, both in academic environments and in mass-media or social networks. Among other things, the shocking decision to cancel the right to abortion for American and Polish women produced echoes worldwide, even in Romania. Although the termination of pregnancy is not an act outside the law in Romania, conservative mindsets put unnecessary pressure on the women who are the beneficiaries of these medical procedures. According to Pressone publication, in 2019 Filia Center⁴ contacted 217 public hospital nationwide, trying to find out how many of them are performing abortions on demand. Out of 158 respondents only 40 medical institutions performed at all times, 31 did not perform during religious holidays and 51 did not perform these medical procedures at all⁵. As long as sex education, abortion, feminism, equal opportunities, gender equality or any other discourse related to identity are considered as being a taboo in a society, we cannot interpret a classical play as *Medea* otheways than through a feminist perspective.

II. Nora and the problem of self-representation

In December 1879, the world premiere of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* took place at Det Kongelige Teater (Royal Danish Theatre). In the author's notes of October 1878, the play in question was named a 'modern tragedy' and proceeded from the consideration that, to paraphrase, there are two spiritual laws in the world, one of the male and the other of the female, and two conscience types, the masculine and the feminine, which are substantially different and unable to reach a common denominator, even if in day to day life, women are judged by the male law⁶.

Six years before the controversial premiere in Copenhagen, Laura Anna Sophie Müller marries the teacher Victor Kieler. Soon, their family life was about to become a real source of inspiration for the future drama. Laura Kieler would never forgive Ibsen for the manner in which he publicly presented her private life, and this fact extended into disputes for a considerable period of time. In a letter addressed to Swedish feminist Fredrika Limnell, Ibsen wrote: "I am not totally clear about what Laura Kieler actually aims at when she tries to get *me* involved in these disputes. A statement from me like the one she wants, namely 'that she is *not* Nora' would be both meaningless and ridiculous, as I have never alleged the opposite. If untruthful rumours have been spread up there in Copenhagen that at an earlier point in her life something

⁴ Centrul Filia (Filia Center) is a Romanian Feminist NGO based in Bucharest. More on: <https://centrulfilia.ro/> (accessed on 27th of October 2022)

⁵ More info at the following link: <https://pressone.ro/ce-omit-sa-spuna-liderii-politici-si-religiosi-romani-cand-vorbesc-despre-avort> (accessed on 26th of October 2022)

⁶ Frode, Helland, Julie Holledge (edit.), *Ibsen on Theatre*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2018, p. 70, (original quote): "There are two kinds of spiritual law, two kinds of conscience, one in the man, and quite different one in the woman. They do not understand each other; but in practical life, the woman is judged according to the law of men, as if she were not a woman but a man."

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

happened which has a kind of likeness with the promissory note in *A Doll's House*, then she herself or her husband, preferably together, (...), can destroy the false rumours”⁷.

Regardless of the endless feud between Ibsen and the Kielers, Nora remains a fascinating character to analyze even today, when female emancipation has different meanings and nuances. In the interpretation of the director Botond Nagy and the dramaturg Ágnes Kali⁸, Nora is a trophy wife who feeds her alienation through convulsive shopping. The carton boxes brought by the couriers narrow the space in the house, unable to compete or to annihilate the woman's nightmares and remorse. The final confrontation is not between Nora and Torvald, but between Nora and herself - a much more painful and honest confrontation. The perfectly technologized home universe becomes a detention space once Nora's conscience is awoken as from a profound coma. Up until that moment, Nora's only relationships are with men, be it her late father, Helmer, Dr. Rank or Krogstad - relationships that come to define her and her self-perception. Nora cannot analyze herself otherwise than from a male perspective and from a male needs. In this case, the Aristotelian recognition is a self-recognition act, a self-assumption act of freedom and acceptance.

Nowadays, the play's relevance appears by illustrating the people's incapacity of communication, regardless of the nature of the relationship that they have - an inability deeply rooted in our education, often different according to gender. Moreover, it poses the problem of *representation vs self-representation*. In her essay, *Feminist Theatre And The Performative Turn (Teatrul feminist și turnura performativă)*, Cristina Modreanu points out the main issues of authentic female representation. According to Modreanu, the representation of women in consumer's culture have entered in our perception so deeply that we no longer notice the infused exploitation. She also states that women who appear on TV as guests, moderators or entertainers are usually valued by the way they look and not by their discourse and that should be a massive concern in our society⁹. This concern can also be raised through a contemporary analysis of Nora's character: the moment she realizes she can

⁷ Idem, p. 79

⁸ The Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj-Napoca production of *Nora* (directed by Botond Nagy, in an adaptation he signed with Kali Ágnes) premiered on the 16th of March 2019. More on: <https://www.huntheater.ro/ro/spectacol/485/nora/> (accessed on 26th October 2022)

⁹ Modreanu, Cristina, *Fluturile Gladiator, Teatru politic, queer&feminist pe scena românească*, București, Editura Cartea Veche, 2016, p. 108, (original quote): ”Reprezentările femeii pe care le consumăm prin muzică, literatură, film și teatru ne-au intrat atât de bine în sistem, încât nici nu mai observăm câte forme de exploatare ne sunt infuzate prin intermediul lor. Femeile care apar la TV - ca invitate, moderatoare sau animatoare - sunt de obicei valorizate prin felul în care arată, nu prin competența sau expertiza lor. Cât despre numărul de femei prezente în studiourile TV, pentru indiferent ce tip de emisiune, inclusiv cele culturale, acesta este mereu inferior numărului de invitați de celălalt gen. E o simplă observație, nu acuz pe nimeni de rea intenție, dar ridic un semn de întrebare”

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

represent herself in a patriarchal society and leaves the ‘prison’ of marriage, the ending remains open. Nora’s change occurs after the curtain goes down, inviting the audience to imagine possible future scenarios for the character. Thus, the personal becomes political, and the female identity in relation with the society a hot topic of ongoing debate.

III. Marlene and gender equality

In a brief history of provocation, as it appears in the introduction of his most important research on in-her-face phenomenon, Aleks Sierz affirms about Caryl Churchill: ”But as far as writing goes, it was Churchill who had the most innovative and thrilling theatrical voice. In *Top Girls* (1982), her prophetic play about women and Thatcherism, she used overlapping dialogue, shifting timescales and emotional truth in a unique combination that revitalized theatrical language”¹⁰. The influence that Churchill has on performative writing and on new dramaturgy is impressive: Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Martin Crimp or Marius von Mayenburg are just a few who claim themselves from the direction opened by her. Regarding the purpose of stage scripts, Churchill has the opinion that a play does not completely exist until it is staged and that the dramaturg learns a great deal from the staging of his or her writing.¹¹

Born in 1983, Churchill states that the major influence of her work comes from Brechtian and non-naturalistic theatre. Although she is a socialist and a feminist playwright, any category is not loose enough to encompass the multitude of themes and innovations she continues to develop over a career spanning more than five decades. For example, the ‘90s represented a huge shift of paradigm in Churchill’s dramaturgy migrating towards a minimalist, elliptical writing¹², as Vicky Angelaki describes it. However, what remains constant in her works are the lack of clear verdicts, leaving the audience the privilege of drawing conclusions.

The socio-political context in which a play like *Top Girls* appeared is given by a change in the way women began to be perceived in British society from the ‘70s. These changes in society occurred through a set of normative acts, from the reforms related to the conditions in which women could obtain abortion on demand (1967), to the simplification of the divorce action (1969), or to the law of equal wages regardless of sex (1970) or the annulment of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975). However, the conservative mentality continued to exist along with the preservation of the traditional

¹⁰ Sierz, Aleks, *In-Yer-Face Theatre. British Drama Today*, UK, Faber&Faber 2000, p. 27

¹¹ Deeney, F. John, Maggie B Gale (edit.), *Cincizeci de dramaturgi moderni și contemporani* (original title: *Fifty Modern and Contemporary Dramatist*), București, Editura Tracus Arte, 2017, pg 91, *apud*. www.royalcoudrttheatre.com/season/weekly-rep-open-court.

¹² Angelaki, Vicky, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain. Staging Crisis*, UK, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p.19

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

roles in society, in spite of all the adopted reforms. More than that, at the time Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, Great Britain was facing job crisis and high inflation. Thatcher's priority was to stop inflation at the expense of increasing employment, which led to social instability. This period is captured with a critical eye in Act Two of *Top Girls*.

The play opens with an anti-naturalist dinner in which female personalities from different eras sit at the table with Marlene, the main character. Through their stories, Churchill launches different feminist themes which she develops throughout the entire play: woman vs career, woman vs motherhood, woman vs ownership (both material goods and one's own body and destiny), woman vs herself. The women's testimonies from Act One build together a history of oppression. Throughout the ages, a woman was considered to be a useful 'tool' of a man in the way of fulfilling his own destiny. "The modern women of the play also have to cope with the endemic enigma of being women in a society where so many standards have been set by men. Act Three, through the character of Joyce, suggests that the only fundamental change for the better – for both women and men – must come through a change in political thinking. Act One gives expression to a universal female resentment which continues on various levels throughout the play."¹³, states Naismith and Worall. The sexual inequalities is felt regardless of the laws of social equity or the abolition of discrimination acts, as it is deeply rooted in society, through traditional mentalities and 'unwritten laws'. This is what the author captures with irony in Act Two, in which different women present themselves at job interviews in the field of 'services', where once employed, it will be difficult for them to advance in career.

The last act of the play focuses almost exclusively on the difference of opinions between Marlene, as a career centered woman and great supporter of Thatcherism and her sister, Joyce, who believes that only Socialism can change the world in any way. The play offers no verdicts, each of the two sisters giving up an important part of themselves in order to follow their convictions. Whether they chose to leave or to stay in the same place, outside or within the family, they will never be fully content with their decision.

As Fina Birulés states, it is difficult to define the category of 'woman' as a single normative identity. She also affirms that women perceive themselves in different ways and have different needs. However, in spite of all the differences and their ideologies, some things are common: their 'right to have rights' as citizens and the freedom to control their own body and decisions.¹⁴

¹³ Naismith, Bill, Nick Worall, *Caryl Churchill. Top Girls*, UK, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013, p. 48

¹⁴ Birulés, Fina, *Antracte. Despre politică, feminism și gândire*, București, Editura frACTalia, 2021, pp. 20-21, (original quote): "Femeile sunt diverse și se înțeleg pe ele însele în moduri foarte diferite, având dorințe extrem de diverse. (...) Totuși, putem spune că majoritatea - feministe sau nu, de dreapta

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

In conclusion, whether we speak of Medea, Nora or the entire gallery of female typologies presented in *Top Girls* - these characters will continue to be relevant as long as the issues exposed through them will endure in society, in one form or another. The three aspects I chose to focus on in the article (the rejection of traditional roles, the representation of the feminine and gender inequality) are just a few of a wide range of painful issues that continue to make their way into the debated topics both in theatre as well as outside of it. This is why I believe that female identity as it is presented in performing arts (and not only) represents a very complex research subject, which needs to be treated with great responsibility by the practitioners and theorists in the field.

Conclusions

Consecrated by Cervantes, Don Quixote has been majestically rewritten/reinterpreted in the modern and postmodern era. Thus, we speak of its resilience: from Unamuno we have extracted philosophical conceptions which, applied to *Sindromul Quijote/ Don Quixote Syndrome*, reveal the exact opposite of the knight and his ethics. Closer to contemporaneity and Carmen Dominte's text is Rushdie's *Quichotte* due to the involvement of drugs and *Don Quijote în Est/ Don Quixote in East* by means of the communist and post-communist experience of the Romanian essayist Octavian Paler in which a knight was driven into a corner by detractors who initially adored him and needed him, then avoided him. The texts and their interpretation, a performance on stage in the case of the play, testify to the immortal resilience of the symbolic character who is reborn with each rewriting and develops laterally, not secondarily according to adaptation theory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Angelaki, Vicky, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain. Staging Crisis*, UK, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017;
- Birulés, Fina, *Antracte. Despre politică, feminism și gândire* (original title: *Entreactes: entorn de la política, el feminisme i el pensament*), București, Editura frACTalia, 2021;
- Euripides, *Medea*, translated by Diane Arson Svarlien, USA, Hackett Publishing Company, 2008;
- Deeney, F. John, Maggie B Gale (edit.), *Cincizeci de dramaturgi moderni și contemporani* (original title: *Fifty Modern and Contemporary Dramatist*), București, Editura Tracus Arte, 2017;

sau de stânga, docile sau critice față de regulile dezbaterii instituționale ori indiferente la lupta politică - nu sunt dispuse să renunțe la acea egalitate pe care o putem numi „dreptul de a avea drepturi”, adică la muncă remunerată, la personalitate juridică și educație. Și, în același timp, nu sunt dispuse să renunțe la libertate: să-și controleze și să se bucure de propriul corp și să-și decidă propriile mișcări și deplasări.”

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Frode, Helland, Julie Holledge (edit.), *Ibsen on Theatre*, London, editura Nick Hern Books;
Modreanu, Cristina, *Fluturile Gladiator*, Teatru politic, queer&feminist pe scena românească,
București, Editura Cartea Veche, 2016;
Naismith, Bill, Nick Worall, Caryl Churchill. *Top Girls*, UK, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013;
Olsen, Sara, Mario Telò (edit.), *Queer Euripides: Re-Readings in Greek Tragedy*, UK, Bloomsbury
Academic, 2022;
Sierz, Aleks, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*. *British Drama Today*, UK, Faber&Faber 2000;
Stuttard, David (edit.), *Looking at Medea*, UK, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Cited articles:

Filia Center (Centrul Filia): <https://centrulfilia.ro/> (accessed on 27th of October 2022);
Hungarian State Theatre from Cluj-Napoca: <https://www.huntheater.ro/ro/spectacol/485/nora/>
(accessed on 26th of October 2022).

Websites:

<https://pressone.ro/ce-omit-sa-spuna-liderii-politici-si-religiosi-romani-cand-vorbesc-despre-avort>,
Filip, Răzvan, 2022, *Ce omit liderii politici și religioși români când vorbesc despre avort*,
Pressone, (accessed on 26th of October 2022)